

FILM STYLE

XIII International Film Studies Conference

Udine/Gorizia, March 28-30, 2006

When looking at the question of style what strikes one immediately is that the meaning of this notion seems to come from its use, without it ever being really defined organically, especially when it comes to the sphere of cinema. References to the style of a period, a genre, a school, a movement or a director (where the notion of style merges with that of *work* and poetics) are in common use, but the definition of "style", as a way of identifying a method of analysis suited to studies of this concept, remains vague and lacking in effective systematization.

The XIII Udine International Film Studies Conference is dedicated to the analysis and study of the notion of style in cinema. The variety of approaches to this notion and its different fields of application, as well as the continuous updating of the forms and modes of cinematic narratives within a framework that is increasingly intermedial, all indicate that a study of this kind could lead to original results at a historiographical, theoretical and methodological level.

If style has traditionally been approached from a prevalently author-based perspective as a complex of typical and recurrent expressive and formal strategies that distinguish a film maker immediately and point to a clear identity, this Conference proposes to systematically abandon the sphere of "author-based styles" and focus its attention not on the individual dimension but on macro-systems. In line with the tradition of the conference we will also be paying particular attention to early cinema, without, however, forgetting the new directions suggested by the contemporary scene.

Here are a number of different directions studies could consider.

Defining a concept of style

There is still no definitive explanation of the notion of style in the cinema sphere. If we trace some general theoretical definitions in an "archaeological" sense and relate them to the context of film communication, what we find is a rather static framework that is not particularly useful for the purposes of analysis. If Roland Barthes claims that style is the antecedent of any linguistic problem, to such an extent that it becomes almost a biological entity, Susan Sontag is of the opinion that it only becomes visible in works of art when it reaches the extent of *excess* or *stylization*. The need to get away from a certain degree of epistemological vagueness goes hand in hand with the need to establish as a reference point the certainty that cinema products acquire their position as works and texts only when they construct a relationship with a communicative situation, every part of which is already defined. It is within this structure that a typology of film style must be looked for, by considering the need to analyse films on a cultural, textual and productive level. The fairly frequent recourse to notions of style formulat-

ed in the sphere of history and theory of the figurative arts has, after all, not produced particularly convincing results.

Standardising procedures intended as the consolidating and stabilising processes of linguistic-expressive strategy systems, that identify and become typical of a period, a movement or a school undoubtedly play a central role here. But at the same time how are we to explain the relationship between standardization and innovation in relation to style? Can style be conceived as a negotiation site?

Referring to formal strategies clearly draws attention to the importance that the level of expression acquires with regard to the concept of style. But what importance should we give to themes, t.i. semantic formalisation?

Early Cinema styles

In no other phase in film history has style been so debated over as in the origins of film and the phase that led to the cinema becoming institutionalized. The notion of style overlaps that of "genre" and in this direction a lot of work has been done to construct distinctive features and therefore to appreciate production companies and single products. Under this respect, there are many aspects that have yet to be studied in depth.

Style and technology

What are the effects of the development of cinematic technology on style and its notion? How does an established stylistic system incorporate new techniques and assign them a specific and original expressive functionality? And in what way, to move in the opposite direction, can the introduction of new technology change style?

In the framework of the wider question of technology, the study of the relationship between style and modes of production is without doubt one of the most explored topics, so what perspectives will future studies take? What is the potential of this approach, over and above the production context of the classical Hollywood cinema?

National/international style

Style can be seen as the expression of a culture, the expression of a national cinema (as shown in Barry Salt's studies). The foreshadowing of a national film style raises a series of considerations involving not only the moment of *production* but also that of the *consumption* of individual films. In the area between these two poles four fundamental analytical criteria have recently been established (Andrew Higson, Steve Neale).

In *economic-productive* terms it is important to establish how and to what extent a domestic cinema industry is required to construct a kind of cinema that is seen as being national.

On a *textual* level, the formal contents and structures of a nation's film need to be examined to establish the intertextual relationships in the context of a "national" culture expressed in other systems, such as music, literature, theatre, etc.

At the level of *consumption*, the nationality of films released in a certain period can be analysed as well as the type of paratextual products that activate and nourish these cinematographic practices.

Last of all, on an *ideological-discursive* level, the critical, theoretical and popular issues raised with regard to national cinema can be looked into.

Can these four guidelines alone cover all the issues involved here? Can the national

style of a film or group of films be defined using other parameters? Moreover, with regard to the processes and discussions that emerged in the first few years following the introduction of sound to cinema, is it legitimate to think of European cinema as “essential”, in comparison with American movies, for example? In other words does European cinema belong specifically to Europe? Is there such a thing as a European film “style”?

Cinema and the other arts: matters of style

The question of style can be a particularly fertile terrain for refining studies into the relationships, exchanges, contamination and crossover between the cinema and other communicative and expressive spheres. From this point of view, to what extent do intermedial interaction and influences contribute to changing the notion of style and its parameters of identification? In 1919/20, for example, in Germany, style was a major factor in terms of economic competition as well as critical and theoretical analysis. Why have we forgotten these stages? The relationship between cinema and new media is another particularly interesting area. Ads, videoclips and short films are often recognised as influencing contemporary cinema, but in which contexts and what shape does this influence occur?

Style and genre

The film genre is the sphere in which the criteria of audiovisual *recognition*, *shaping* and *repetition* are regulated. Genres are always constructed with hindsight and their historical and social existence is based on pragmatic (i.e. the effects they are supposed to reach with regard to their audience), semantic (the constant themes that are referred to in their texts) or syntactic properties (the formal characteristics that regulate their communicative principles). Recent theories (i.e. Rick Altman, Mark Jankovich) tend to see film genres as mobile entities, constantly changing, underlining their relative character, dictated by material contingencies. Is there a clearly defined, certain, insurmountable boundary between style and genre or should both terms rather be ascribed to the same discursive family of narrative and linguistic “macrosystems”?

Style and acting performance

Just as we can speak of acting styles, acting itself can be considered to be part of a more general stylistic system: so what changes and influences result from acting performance? And how does the “general” style contribute to determining actors’ performance?

Reception

Studies on cinematographic reception can make highly original contributions to the notion of style. Can style, like genre, function as a system of the audience’s expectations and abilities? And in what way do factors such as criticism and audience affect the way a style develops? Can style, in its role as a communicative category, contribute to the definition of the spectator? What implications can be derived from comparing the notion of style to the notion of taste? What role does the paratextual apparatus of the film play in the construction of cinematographic style?

Closing date for proposal presentations: November 15, 2005

Any proposal received after this date will not be taken into consideration.

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